

New Study Links Facebook To Depression: But Now We Actually Understand Why.

The irony of [Facebook](#) is by now known to most. The “social” network has been linked to a surprising number of undesirable mental health consequences: Depression, low self-esteem, and bitter jealousy among them. Now, a new [study](#) in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* finds that not only do Facebook and depressive symptoms go hand-in-hand, but the mediating factor seems to be a well-established psychological phenomenon: “Social comparison.” That is, making comparisons, often between our most humdrum moments and our friends “highlight reels” – the vacation montages and cute baby pics – is what links Facebook time and depressive symptoms together. So is it time to cut down on Facebook? Maybe. Or maybe we should just adjust our attitude toward it.

In the new study from University of Houston, the researchers queried people about their Facebook use, how likely they were to make social comparisons (e.g., “I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things”), and how often they experienced depressive symptoms. It turned out that people who used Facebook more tended to have more depressive symptoms – but social comparison was a mediating factor only for men.

“It doesn’t mean Facebook causes depression, but that depressed feelings and lots of time on Facebook and comparing oneself to others tend to go hand in hand,” said study author and doctoral candidate Mai-Ly Steers.

The second part of the study went a little deeper. Previous, face-to-face research on social comparison had found that upward social comparisons (e.g., looking at someone more popular or attractive than yourself) tend to make people feel worse, whereas downward comparisons (comparing yourself to someone with lower grades than you) tend to make people feel better about themselves. The second part of the new study tried to tap into this difference, asking people exactly *how* they felt when they viewed other people’s posts (e.g.,

“Today, when I was on Facebook, I felt less confident about what I have achieved compared to other people.”).

It turned out that people who logged more Facebook time not only had more depressive symptoms, but that social comparison – in *any* direction – was the mediator, and for both sexes. In other words, it didn’t matter whether a person was making upward, downward, or neutral social comparison – they were all linked to a greater likelihood for depressive symptoms.

So the study results may not be too surprising, but it does call out the mediating factor – making comparisons to your friends – in a new way. “Although other studies have established links between depressive symptoms and Facebook,” Steers says, “our study is the first of its kind to determine that the underlying mechanism between this association is social comparison. In other words, heavy Facebook users might be comparing themselves to their friends, which in turn, can make them feel more depressed.”

So should we all obliterate our Facebook accounts? It’s probably not totally necessary (although cutting down can’t hurt). Steers says the takeaway is larger than that – perhaps that our relationship with technology is often more nuanced than we think. For instance, as we’ve seen again and again, social networks aren’t purely social, and they may even veer into the realm of the anti-social.

“You should feel good after using Facebook,” says Steers.

“However...the unintended consequence is that if you compare yourself to your Facebook friends’ ‘highlight reels,’ you may have a distorted view of their lives and feel that you don’t measure up to them, which can result in depressive symptoms. If you’re feeling bad rather than good after using Facebook excessively, it might be time to reevaluate and possibly step away from the keyboard.” She adds that people prone to depression may want to be aware of the connections, and think about how and when they log on to social media.

Steers also calls to mind Theodore Roosevelt’s belief that “Comparison is the thief of joy.” If that’s true (and science seems to confirm that it is), it may be partly up to us to try to stop making the comparisons between our dullest moments and our friends’ most momentous ones.

And maybe our friends could keep in mind that life isn't all about the highlight reel after all – and that it wouldn't hurt to post about those quieter, less glamorous moments, too. That might actually go a long way in making people feel more connected, instead of just the opposite.